

# Partners in Lighthouse Preservation

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**I**n the 1960s and 1970s, the Coast Guard undertook a massive program to automate their light stations which eliminated the need for personnel to tend the aids to navigation. The rationale was to save housing structure maintenance costs and free billets. These freed billets would then be used to staff the new and expanding Coast Guard programs mandated by Congress such as Fisheries and Drug Interdiction.

Unfortunately, vandals quickly made their ugly mark on deserted stations. No amount of protection (alarms, boarding up windows, etc.) could stay the tenacious vandal. Additionally, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 which required federal agencies with structures listed in the National Register of Historic Places, or even eligible for inclusion, to take into consideration what impacts any of their actions would have on these properties. The Coast Guard's cost-saving program was flying directly in the face of portions of the Act.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the Twelfth Coast Guard District in Northern California, hit upon a plan to protect the historic properties and associated automated aids to navigation, and provide public access at the same time. The first step was to convince Coast Guard headquarters that the standard year-to-year license should be expanded to a longer term to make the stations more attractive to potential recipients. Coast Guard Headquarters agreed and the term of licensing was extended to 20 years. A San Francisco Bay Area nonprofit group requested, and was granted, a 20-year license for the 1874 East Brother Light Station. In less than a year, the group restored the historic Victorian light station to its 19th-century splendor and opened it as a nonprofit bed and breakfast.

Since the East Brother license, the Coast Guard has extended the ability of local districts to issue 30-year licenses; many districts also issue five-year licenses. Each license has a provision allowing either party to rescind the license, by letter, within 90 days.

Following quickly on the heels of this successful East Brother Light Station project was the licensing of two northern California stations to the State of California. The state, in turn, licensed

them to the American Youth Hostel Organization. Other stations were licensed to a port authority and nonprofit groups.

The Twelfth District's action spread to other Coast Guard Districts and today many light stations are in the hands of nonprofits. These groups have spent labor and funds to restore and open stations in a variety of creative ways.

There is an erroneous notion among some people that the Coast Guard can sell, or give away, light stations. In fact, if the Coast Guard, or any government agency, declares land in its inventory surplus to its needs, it is transferred to either the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) or the General Services Administration (GSA). If the agency's property was withdrawn from public lands, it is transferred to BLM; if the property was purchased for government purposes, it is transferred to GSA who in turn offer the property to other federal, state, and local agencies. If there are no government "takers," the property is sold to the highest bidder which in the case of historic light stations could be a disaster. The preferred scenario has been when the Coast Guard has formed partnerships with nonprofit groups willing to take on the restoration and maintenance of the properties, this not only protects the properties, but makes them available to the public in a variety of ways. It also takes the financial burden off the government and protects the Coast Guard's aids to navigation equipment.

All across America, the "greening" of our historic light stations has been an outstanding success. They have been repaired, restored, and relocated. Each community has sought various means of raising funds to return their light station to the public domain. Three are under the care of the American Youth Hostel organization, a few are bed and breakfasts, some serve as offices for nonprofit groups, but most are opened to the public as museums.

The various efforts are profound and dramatic. The Junior Service League of St. Augustine, Florida raised \$650,000 to restore the duplex keeper's quarters. They then raised \$90,000 to repair the first-order lens, which was damaged by gun fire. Continuing their work, they then raised over \$200,000 to paint the interior and exterior of

the 161' high tower. All this from a small group in a city of 17,000 people.

The Fire Island Lighthouse Preservation Society raised 1.6 million dollars from the private sector to restore their tower and keeper's dwelling and set aside a fund to maintain the structure in perpetuity. Local groups were formed to move Rhode Island's huge Block Island Southeast Lighthouse and Massachusetts' Cape Cod and Nauset Beach Lighthouses. Four stations in the Hudson River have been restored and a group is working on a fifth.

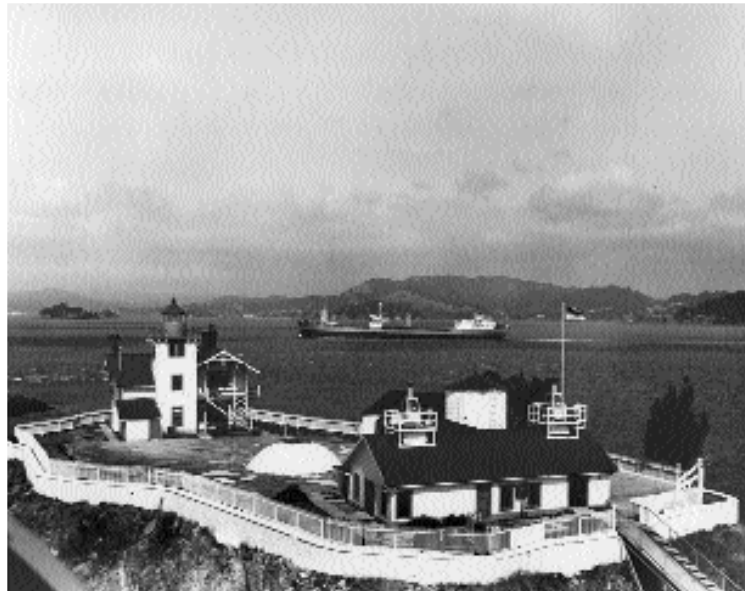
Throughout the Great Lakes, groups are chipping and painting their local light stations.

In addition to non-profit groups, other partners have evolved over the years—some by accident. When the Coast Guard, or old Lighthouse Service, abandoned a property located within the boundaries of another government agency's property, the structure became the responsibility of that agency. Today, the U.S. Forest Service has five light stations in Hiawatha National Forest and is involved with another in Oregon. The Fish and Wildlife Service has spent funds to restore the Thacher Island's north tower and the Monomoy Point station. As of this writing, our Society holds a license for two Coast Guard light stations: New Dungeness in Washington and Plymouth in Massachusetts. The Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association has spent the past several years restoring the St. Helena Light Station on the northern shores of Lake Michigan. That group has successfully used Boy Scout Troops to assist their efforts, which has proven educational to all parties.

In spite of all the success the preservation of light stations have achieved, there is still work to be accomplished and decisions to be made. Not all

light stations can, or should, be saved. Several are in remote locations difficult to access and subject to harsh weather conditions. Others have lost most of their historic integrity over the years. A case in point being the Sankaty Head Lighthouse on Nantucket Island. All the ancillary buildings have been razed. Years ago the Coast Guard removed the lens (it's in a local museum) and the lantern room. Local objections caused the Coast Guard to fashion a replacement lantern and install it on the tower, but even a quick glance shows it to be an

ersatz lantern. Finally, at some point the interior cast-iron stairway was replaced with an aluminum staircase. Thus, what we have today, perched on an eroding cliff, is a chimney—a ghost of it's former self. Funds to move this structure back from the eroding cliff would be better spent on a light station with more of its



historic fabric intact.

In some cases the Coast Guard has used the quarters of automated light stations to house service personnel. Several light station quarters are used for enlisted personnel and three stations house Coast Guard admirals. But, as stations outlive their usefulness as housing, we hope the Coast Guard will continue to explore placing light stations with appropriate nonprofit groups. The thought that a light station might pass through the hands of the GSA into ownership of a profit entity is anathema to the U.S. Lighthouse Society way of thinking.

Overall, as we enter the 21st century, light stations are shining bright again and pointing the way for others seeking means to preserve other historical structures.

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*East Brother Island Light Station (1874), in San Francisco Bay, was one the first light-houses to be leased by the Coast Guard to a nonprofit group for an extended period. It continues to serve as an active aid to navigation and bed & breakfast. Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.*